

# V. S. Naipaul: Riddles and Reflections

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Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2001, Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul (knighted in 1990) died on August 11, 2018 at the age of 85. In along writing career lasting more than five decades, Naipaul produced an impressive body of works: short stories, literary and political essays, travel writings, and memoirs. His curious, as well as somewhat obscure, origin, the Indian community in Trinidad, seemed a detriment to him when he began that remarkable career in the fifties. What once was an obstacle became a source of much inspiration later though Naipaul loathed the characterization of being an “East Indian” author.

Born to Hindu parents in Trinidad, which, in the colonial scheme of things, occupied just a dot on the Empire’s map, Naipaul grew up in a large extended family comprising several uncles, aunts, and many children, siblings as well as cousins. Despite his father’s failure to be an adequate provider—Seepersad Naipaul was prone to frequent bouts of depression as well—Naipaul received a fine education in Trinidad and secured a scholarship to study English literature at Oxford. After graduation, he did not return to Trinidad and chose instead to remain in England. For a while, he worked for the Caribbean service of the British Broadcasting Corporation. His first work, *The Mystic Masseur*, appeared in 1957; it treats the rise of a politician whose early career includes stints as a writer and a faith healer. The work combines satire and humor effectively. Other books set in the colonial Caribbean island followed, the most significant of which was *A House for Mr. Biswas*. *Mr. Biswas* narrates the life of its eponymous hero who resembles Seepersad and works as a journalist and an author but has to depend mostly on his in-laws to make ends meet. The house he builds at the end for himself and his family in Trinidad is as flimsy as his life has been there.

Following the publication of *Mr. Biswas*, Naipaul was recognized as a rising star among the new generation of English writers. His focus, on the other hand, shifted from fiction to travel narratives though he did not abandon fiction entirely. The territory he was going to cover was vast; it included the West Indies, South America, India, Africa, and several non-Arab Islamic countries. Naipaul chose regions of the world that were in the cusp of tradition and modernity; many of them had freed themselves from European colonial rule only a couple of decades ago and had failed to

establish stable governments. His unflattering portrait of them often provoked strong disdain among readers, especially those who lived there.

Naipaul was often compared with Joseph Conrad, the Polish émigré who, like Naipaul, wrote in English, lived in England, and focused on societies that had come in contact with Europe through its colonial ventures. While Conrad describes an earlier time, Naipaul a later one. The two authors’ *Heart of Darkness* and *A Bend in the River* (1979), respectively, illustrate an interesting point. One describes the Belgian Congo and the other Mobutu’s Zaire. It is the same region of Africa separated by eighty years. Conrad exposes the greed and cruelty underlying Europe’s lucrative ivory trade but allows very few Africans to speak in his work. European greed and corruption become African ones in Naipaul’s work where Africans are running the show because the unnamed African country (Conrad had not named it either) is a newly decolonized nation now. In one key aspect, however, Naipaul firmly adheres to the Conradian notion: Africa is quite unsuitable for civilization.

The bleak world of despair and corruption that Naipaul portrayed in *A Bend in the River*, a novel, he amplified manifold in his travel narratives, a genre that permits direct authorial commentary. The first of its kind was *The Middle Passage* (1962); it recounts Naipaul’s travel experience in the West Indies. Ideas that Naipaul repeated in many of his later travel accounts first appear in this book. One such notion is the mimicry of the newly emerging decolonized societies. Of all their ills, this particular vice irked Naipaul more than the others. About the two communities who were transplanted in the Caribbean islands by European imperialists, the Indian and the African, Naipaul writes, “Like monkeys pleading for evolution, each claiming to be whiter than the other, Indians and Negroes appeal to the unacknowledged white audience to see how much they despise one another.” While the attempt to be “white” is a huge failing, Naipaul misses the complex psychology behind the phenomenon. Frantz Fanon, another Caribbean, examines its deeper causes in *Black Skin, White Mask* (1952) and explains that it is an effect of racism. The black psyche, Fanon shows, is torn between accommodation and alienation. While the white society tempts the African mind with justice and equality, deep inside it treats the African with

contempt and as a lesser human. Africans’ high achievements and talents do little to raise them in white esteem. A case in point is Fanon himself. He was a well-trained psychiatrist at Lyon, but French patients often refused to be treated by him.

During his lifetime, Naipaul continued to repel and attract readers. Rob Nixon, the literary scholar, called him as “a postcolonial mandarin,” which forms the subtitle of Nixon’s book. Nixon shows how Naipaul’s favored mode of writing, the travelogue, is rooted in the works of orientalist European travelers. Not only are there critics, there are also reputed authors among Naipaul’s detractors. Derek Walcott, another Caribbean Nobel laureate, humorously described Naipaul as “V. S. Nightfall” in “At Last,”

“hammer into the ground” the “nothing people” of Africa, Naipaul, in Achebe’s words, did so “with his well-crafted mallet of deadly prose.” Naipaul’s unique command of the English prose is a fact acknowledged by his friends and foes alike. Following the publication of *The Middle Passage*, Evelyn Waugh noted its brilliance and observed that Naipaul’s “exquisite mastery of the English language . . . should put to shame his British contemporaries.” Waugh did not live long enough to read Naipaul’s *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), a much more complex work that combines travel narrative, fiction, and autobiography in an exquisite blend. It is no surprise that the Nobel committee mentioned this work in particular and praised Naipaul’s mastery of his materials in its

especially the lines “The greenhouse never so badly needed paint./The chimney is fifty years old and slants to one side./A fantastic effort has failed, a repetition/In a repetitiousness of men and flies.”

Naipaul continued to write after *The Enigma* though, in the nineties, he began to complain that it was increasingly painful for him to carry the idea of a book for months. Still, in later years, he authored more than half a dozen books, including fiction.

And he kept getting entangled in controversies. In 2011, in an interview organized by the Royal Geographic Society, he vented a wholesale condemnation of female writing. As an example, he chose Jane Austen who displayed a “sentimental sense of the world.” Going further, he declared that all female writing is “sentimental tosh.” Neither Nadine Gordimer, who was alive then, nor Tony Morrison dignified these comments with their responses.

What an author writes is shaped by his or her life experience—Naipaul’s was unique in many respects. Born in Trinidad, no jewel in the crown and peopled by indentured laborers, slaves, and few privileged Europeans; to parents, who lacked the means to give him a secure home; Naipaul developed a grim view of the world, a world of distrust and disdain. He became a great author by a dedication to the calling that few can match. It was through the dint of sheer labor; he did not believe in talent and humbly acknowledged always that his fine prose was a product of painstaking labor. He refused to subscribe to the oppositional politics of his time and hence represented the left-leaning elite, such as Yvette and Raymond in *A Bend in the River*, unflatteringly, as sentimental and ineffectual. Depending on one’s point of view, that political incorrectness shows courage because it castigates one’s one kind risking vilification or capitulation because it caters to the official ideology of the west—Edward Said’s characterization of Naipaul as “a scavenger” is based on a reasoning this sort. Naipaul treaded a path that was not well chartered in his time. Many chose to follow it later because it was Naipaul who showed them that a humble origin was not an impediment to an outstanding writing career. Salman Rushdie articulates the feeling of many after Naipaul’s death: “We disagreed all our lives, about politics, about literature, and I feel as sad as if I just lost a beloved older brother. RIP Vidia.”

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a poem. In it Walcott writes, “You spit on your people./ your people applaud./ your former oppressors laurel you./The thorns biting your forehead/are contempt/disguised as concern.” In later poem, “The Mongoose,” Walcott hurled a deadlier diatribe against Naipaul. Chinua Achebe, on a very similar note, voiced strong dislike of Naipaul. In his *Hopes and Impediments*, Achebe excoriates Naipaul for failing to recognize the humanity of Africans. Indeed, to Achebe, Naipaul’s Africa in *A Bend in the River* misrepresents the continent in a much worse way than Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Achebe’s comment in *Home and Exile* is worth recalling, “he [Naipaul] held Africans in deep contempt himself, and made no secret of it. Although he was writing about Africa, he was not writing for Africans.”

In spite of Achebe’s deep disapproval of Naipaul, a grudging admiration for him slips through in *Home and Exile*. While Naipaul loved to

award citation. Though subtitled “A Novel,” *The Enigma* is largely autobiographical and recounts, among other topics, Naipaul’s early difficulties as an émigré determined to be a writer in England following the footsteps of no precursor.

A pronounced melancholy pervades *The Enigma*, however. Its setting is Wiltshire, where Naipaul had his home and wrote some of his finest works. To write about Wiltshire, it has to come alive first to the narrator who is beset by existential angst and is fully aware of his alien presence in an English countryside. He is profoundly moved by the decay and disrepair around him, and his assumptions of stability in his new home and surrounding crumble. Here lies *The Enigma*’s power to stir the reader. The book captures the throes of transition of rural England into crass modernity and portrays a human condition that is all too familiar and universal. Wallace Stevens’ “The Plain Sense of Things” comes to mind,

## REVIEWS

# Kom Chena Boro Manush: Abdul Quadir

Edited by Emran Mahfuz and Ashiq Reza. Kaler Dhoni, 2017

REVIEWED BY MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN

The surge of Bengali nationalism was first demonstrated during the Language Movement of East Bengal in 1952 and it reached its culmination by the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971. However, the vital force behind this mass upheaval was a literary movement which is now almost forgotten by Bangladeshi intelligentsia. The movement was called “Emancipation of Intellect” of which aim was to encourage Bengalis, particularly the East Bengalis, to study art, literature and science and spread the knowledge of these disciplines in Bengali language. The pioneer of this movement was Abdul Quadir, a gifted poet, a prolific essayist, a renowned journalist and editor and publisher of many prominent journals, magazines and newspapers of the undivided Bengal. Edited by Emran Mahfuz and Ashiq Reza, the voluminous book titled *Kom Chena Boro Manush* reflects on the life and works of this great literary personality of our nation.

Through his lifelong efforts to establish a knowledge-based society in the East Bengal, this polymath laid the foundation of Bangladesh’s nationalistic movements and initiated the nation’s literary Renaissance, if I may. This great writer and thought-leader can be called the pioneer of free thinking in the conservative Muslim society of East Bengal during the late Nineteenth century. His writings were the unseen inspiration behind many

nationalistic and ideological movements in the history of Bangladesh.

However, in the recent few years, the contributions of this significant literary personality seem almost forgotten. Very few of this generation know about him. But this rather impressive book first launched in the Ekushey Book Fair 2017, is a massive collection of Quadir’s writing. There is in total 45 articles on Abdul Quadir’s life and works, along with an additional compilation of rare letters written by him to different eminent personalities of that time. This indeed provides a unique and detailed picture of Bangladeshi literary society in the late Nineteenth century.

Besides these articles, the book also includes a detailed biographical timeline of Abdul Quadir, his family tree, some of the rarest and historic photographs, list of all of his publications, some of his writings and poems. This book will surely enable our young generation to delve deep into our momentous history through the lived reality of one of Bangladesh’s great thought-leaders. His thoughts are still relevant and can contribute immensely to tackle the growing extremism through literary activities. For instance, Abdul Quadir says in one of his articles, “Most of our modern authors do not feel the necessity of thinking about the influence of Wahabist Movement, Aligarh



Movement, or Mustafa Kamal’s Turkish Revolution in the Muslim society of Bengal.

In the preface of the book, the young editors aptly observe, “Abdul Quadir was completely unaffected by the growing racism, communalism, movement for the nation states and Hindu-Muslim conflicts. His thoughts were centered on the intellectual emancipation of the people of East Bengal through literary activism. While working on his life we feel amazed to see how his century old thoughts are still very relevant to this day.”

In the contents, all the articles on Abdul Quadir have been basically arranged in eight chapters focusing on various perspectives of his life, reviews of his poetry, research and editing works, review of his researches on Kazi Nazrul Islam, his philosophical thoughts, compilation of his interviews, letters written to and by Abdul Quadir and rare historic photos in the two enclosures. In all these chapters, the book offers nearly fifty articles by renowned scholars, researchers and litterateurs on different aspects of his life and works.

The renowned poet and author Abdul Mannan Syed claims in his article, “Abdul Quadir made his magazine *Joyoti* the pioneer of modern Bengali literature without compromising his Bengali-Muslim identity. Poets and authors like Kazi Nazrul Islam, Kazi Abdul Wadud, Premendra Mitra, Achintya Kumar Sengupta, Mohitlal Majumder, Jashimuddin, Dhurjati Prasad Mukherji were among the regular writers of this magazine and many of them started their literary career with it.”

Throughout his life Abdul Quadir relentlessly tried to establish a knowledge-based free thinking society in Bangladesh. Other than working on his own creative faculties, he preserved some of the best compositions of the rebel poet, Kazi Nazrul Islam. Without his efforts, much of Nazrul works

might have been lost forever. He spent a great part of his professional life as the editor of different magazines and newspapers. He edited the literary magazine *Nabajug* founded by Kazi Nazrul Islam. He was also the editor of *Mahe Nao*, an illustrated monthly journal published by the Pakistani government. He also edited the works of Kazi Nazrul Islam, Begum Rokeya, Qazi Imdadul Haque and Ismail Hossain Siraji, and authored several reference books on Bengali literature.

For his literary contributions, he achieved numerous awards and recognition both by the Pakistan and Bangladesh Government. For his original research on Bengali literature and Kazi Nazrul Islam, he was awarded Bangla Academy Award in 1963. He was also awarded Ekushey Padak by the Bangladesh Government in 1976. This prolific writer passed away in 1984. About his later life, eminent writer and activist Syed Abul Maksud writes, “Abdul Quadir was an incredible researcher. He used to study a lot. Even during his last days, he never wasted a time without studying. I have learned a lot from him.”

This rich collection, therefore, is fit to be a collectible by all those who want to know about the roots of Bengali Muslim literature.

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